

'All is not as it seems': disguise in the *Odyssey*.

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Nothing is quite what it seems to be in the *Odyssey*. Gods appear as men and disappear as birds. Men become pigs; pigmen turn out to be really princes; beggars have more prowess as archers than nobles. In this essay, for which he was awarded the 2014 Gladstone Memorial Prize, Jamie Hardie explores the role of disguise throughout the *Odyssey*.

Disguise is a theme not only present in the *Odyssey* but pervading it. Whether it is the physical concealment of Odysseus' identity, the dissemblance of Penelope and the suitors of their true motives, or the use of a non-linear narrative by Homer himself, the interplay between secrecy and the dramatically inevitable reveal constitutes a great deal of the *Odyssey*'s interest.

Of the great range of deceptions portrayed in the poem, one symbol stands out as a point of comparison to the others: in book 11, the prophet Teiresias tells Odysseus that once he has returned home he should

take a well-cut oar and go on till you reach a people who know nothing of the sea... and offer Lord Poseidon the rich sacrifice,

and that the right place will be signalled by

some other traveller who refers to the object you are carrying on your shoulder as a 'winnowing fan'.

The oar has not put on a disguise – yet it is in disguise nonetheless. Disguise is dependent on the beholder tricking themselves; disguise means nothing without context. To explore disguise in the *Odyssey*, I will apply these ideas to the many wiles of Odysseus, Penelope, and the rest.

Nobody's audacity

The most iconic episode of disguise in the *Odyssey* takes place in the cave of the Cyclops Polyphemus. After enticing Polyphemus into a 'drunken stupor', Odysseus introduces himself as *mê tis*, or 'nobody', so that when the Cyclops screams for help after he is blinded by a hot stake his neighbours cannot understand him. With exquisite irony, they reply:

if you are alone and nobody is assaulting you, you must be sick.

While this is a classic fable of mind over matter, of a monstrous brute defeated by quick wits, one cannot help but marvel (with the lessons of the oar in mind) at the stupidity of the Cyclops in allowing himself to be taken in.

Such contrivances are commonplace and indeed necessary in Homer, but they indicate that Odysseus' true skill is less in the conception of the trick, than in the sheer audacity of attempting such a ridiculous plan – as ridiculous as to refer to what is clearly an oar as a winnowing fan. 'Audacity' would nevertheless be a poor translation of what is described as *mêtis* in a famous play on words: both Odysseus' wisdom or craftiness, and his label as 'nobody'. Yet Homer suggests more than just a cheap pun with this conflation: *mêtis*, the essential ingredient of disguise or trickery, is required if one wishes to impersonate anybody, but to attain it one must first reduce oneself to nobody. The oar and the winnowing fan are both merely pieces of wood, after all.

Disguised as Odysseus

It is as Nobody that Odysseus first comes to the Phaeacians, and he remains nameless in their company for a long time. He does not use a false name, or tell lies, or attempt to trick them in any way, yet he is in disguise. Once again this is only enabled by the compliance of his audience, who do not press him for details until the time is right:

do not, for some crafty reason, withhold the answers to the questions I may ask. Frankness is better.

What follows Antinous' urging is important for its utter lack of disguise or

pretence, a confession in which Odysseus dramatically reveals the truth:

I am Odysseus, Laertes' son. The whole world talks of my stratagems, and my fame has reached the heavens.

Homer here exposes the essential link between the disguise and its divestment: the power of the deception is only apparent after it has occurred. Odysseus may only sacrifice to Poseidon after his oar is mistaken for a fan, because it is then, and only then, that its status as an oar and association with the sea becomes so important. The most dramatic moment of the interaction between Polyphemus and Odysseus is when Odysseus taunts him with his real name. While in itself the confession to the Phaeacians is only a primer for the revelation in Odysseus' own home, the moment is also powerful because honesty of any kind is sparse in the *Odyssey*. For a character like Odysseus, given his reputation for 'stratagems', to speak so frankly emphasizes the exhaustion and even desperation of his situation. Thus, by including honesty sparingly in a work so wrapped up in tricks and lies, Homer uses disguise, or the lack thereof, to create poignancy and impact.

Not recognised in his own country

Odysseus revealing himself by degrees becomes a staple of the final books: to Telemachus, to the suitors, and finally to Penelope. But how does Odysseus disguise himself so convincingly from his own family – surely the most impressive feat of disguise in the whole *Odyssey*. On the surface, Homer turns to an old favourite: divine intervention. Odysseus himself indeed bears comparison to the immortals, who almost never appear without disguise (Odysseus himself says to Athene 'you are always changing your disguise'). Disguise is a divine attribute in Homer's universe, and Odysseus is elevated above normal men by his talent for it. When 'Athene touched him now with her wand', and changed his physical appearance, it is easy to attribute the deception to some kind of magic power.

Yet acts of god, or goddess, are often a colourful metaphor for the hero's own prowess, and so it is prudent to look to the rules of disguise for a more satisfying explanation, as prompted by the ever-looming oar: audience and context.

For why indeed, despite their wistful hopes for his homecoming, would Odysseus' family and staff expect him to return, alone and haggard, after twenty years? And why, if his appearance was truly changed by the swish and flick of Athene's magic wand, did she not remove or obscure the scar from a boar hunt, by which Eurycleia recognises her master whilst bathing him? It is telling that Telemachus is the first to know of Odysseus' return: young and idealistic, filled with dreams of being reunited with his lost father, he would be the most likely both to recognise him and to believe that he was really home. By contrast, the world-weary Penelope remains suspicious until the last, calling Eurycleia 'crazy' and testing Odysseus for the 'infallible proof' of his identity through the olive bole bed (raising the innovative and amusing prospect of someone impersonating Odysseus himself). The notably arrogant suitors prove easy prey for even simple tricks by virtue of their *hubris*.

Homer forces us to confront the possibility that it is easy to hide the truth from someone, provided you know exactly what they are looking for. Odysseus' skill in disguise comes not from putting on dirty clothes nor walking with a limp, nor even being magically transformed, but from judging precisely what is expected by those from whom he is disguised. This is why Argus, his old hunting dog, 'became aware of Odysseus' presence', since a beast, like a god, cannot be second-guessed; disguise directly exploits man's propensity for assumption. Animals, in any event, have great difficulty distinguishing oars from winnowing fans.

Disguise and the man

'A man' is the first word of the *Odyssey*, and masculinity or humanity rivals disguise for the main theme of the work. If Odysseus is to be seen as a model of both, then Homer surely suggests an important link between the two concepts: the notion that disguise is a masculine trait. This is certainly not the impression given by the story of Achilles hiding disguised amongst the women to avoid war, but Zeus' sexual escapades in countless physical forms could be to some readers more compelling. There is a paradox here inherited through the agonies of medieval chivalry by our own society: James Bond, the cornerstone of modern pop culture masculinity, is a professional spy (hence a master of disguise); the costumes and capers of the eunuch Varys

in the popular *Game of Thrones* television series have less manly connotations for obvious reasons. Either way, Odysseus represents the first in a long line of protagonists who 'live by their wits', and disguise is central to his progress. Without his many identities and deceptions, he would never have made it home to be the loving father and husband he is intended to be; on a more abstract level, his knack for disguises represents a prudence and flexibility essential for the full adoption of masculinity. As well as featuring so heavily in the plot of the work, disguise lies at the core of Odysseus' character, and his character at the core of the *Odyssey*.

Disguise and the woman

If Odysseus is the masculine nature of disguise, Penelope shows its feminine side. Penelope's disguises are even more subtle and nuanced than those of her husband, for she disguises her feelings rather than her appearance. She disguises her reluctance to marry under the pretence of weaving a 'shroud for Lord Laertes' but 'undid the work' each night; she hides her great grief and indecision from the suitors with careful dignity and the physical aid of a 'shining veil', a symbol of her wary distance as well as a literal disguise. She even tricks Odysseus himself into confirming his identity by feigning ignorance of the structure of his bed. The feminine disguise is presented by Homer as softer and subtler, but no less powerful or able.

Yet Penelope's dissemblances to the suitors ultimately fail as they figure out her shroud trick and remain dogged in pursuit – not because of any shortcoming on Penelope's part, but because the success of a trick or disguise depends on the victim: Penelope's suitors expect her reluctance and are thus not fooled by her attempts to hide it. However, their own disguises – as the respectable youth of the island's rulers – fare better, as evidenced by the failure of the Ithacan assembly to help Mentor or Telemachus, and by the swift and violent reaction to their deaths. Despite the clearly immoral and almost depraved perspective of the suitors that the reader is given, they are armoured and disguised by their position in society. They do not put any particular effort into hiding their villainous nature as they openly feast in Odysseus' house and incite beggars into fighting each other for their amusement, but their disguise is preserved by the society that prefers to turn a blind eye. In his depiction of the disguises of the supporting cast Homer reinforces the idea that disguise involves partnership between deceiver and deceived.

Disguise is so prevalent in Homer's *Odyssey* that its very absence is used for dramatic effect, and the many forms it takes – physical alteration, emotional

misdirection, or simply giving a false name – all inform and enrich one another. Homer places the focus on two main relationships within the context of disguise: the disguise and the reveal, and the deceiver and the deceived. In each, the partners are worthless without each other, because a disguise becomes important only when it is revealed, and because someone is only tricked when they allow it (the BBC drama *Hustle* said it best: 'You can't cheat an honest man'). If 'All is not as it seems', as the *Odyssey* tells us, that is only because we were so ready to believe what has since been revealed to be false.

Jamie Hardie is a student at Elizabeth College Guernsey. For the topics and rules for the 2015 Gladstone Memorial Essay Prize see p. 3.